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SOME OWLS ALONG THE GILA RIVER IN ARIZONA

By M. FRENCH GILMAN

WITH FIVE PHOTOS

DURING the season of 1908 and 1909 I made the following notes on the owls found at the points here named, on the Pima Reservation in Arizona: Blackwater, 1362 feet altitude; Sacaton, 1275 feet; and Agua Caliente, 380 feet. Up to date six species have been noted: Western Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus pallescens*), Barn Owl (*Aluco pratincola*), Spotted Screech Owl (*Otus trichopsis*), Burrowing Owl (*Speotyto cunicularia hypogaea*), Ferruginous Pigmy Owl (*Glaucidium phalaenoides*) and Elf Owl (*Micropallas whitneyi*).

Of these the Western Horned is most in evidence, both to eye and ear, tho perhaps not more numerous than some of the others. The Pima Indians call this bird Chú koot, and say it is the soul, spirit, or reincarnation of some of their dead. Their ideas on the subject seem rather hazy, and it is hard to get at just what they do believe on the question. Since a certain interview with a very intelligent Indian in California, I have been rather skeptical in regard to what Indians tell about their peculiar beliefs and notions. I was commenting to this Indian about a certain paper that had appeared wherein he was quoted concerning some Indian superstitions, etc. He laughed heartily and said, "Oh, when those people ask us a lot of fool questions we tell them most anything; we give them a good fill!"

Western Horned Owls are found mostly in cottonwood trees along the river, and at night range out on the alfalfa fields in search of gophers. I have seen them also in bluffs and cliffs on the rocky hills a few miles from the river. At Blackwater and Sacaton they are very numerous, but at Agua Caliente only one was seen, that on a rocky hillside. A favorite perch of the bird is the roof of a building, and there they sit and murder sleep in the most approved fashion, along about 2 A. M. I have been obliged to get up repeatedly and go out and throw rocks at them in order to get my normal amount of slumber.

The eggs are often placed in an old nest of the Red-tailed Hawk, in a cottonwood tree or a giant cactus (*Cereus giganteus*). The photo, taken by S. C. Mason of the Department of Agriculture and used by his courtesy, shows a nest in a big

cactus, and a careful scrutiny reveals an Owl's head projecting above the rim of the nest.

February 28, I found two eggs in an old Redtail's nest, 60 feet up in a cottonwood tree. Both old birds were at home but made no demonstration when I climbed to the home. A Redtail that perched in the top of a neighboring tree did not escape so easily tho, as the male owl savagely attacked him, and drove him off. March 14 another nest was found containing two eggs. This nest was merely a decayed hollow in the forks of a big cottonwood tree, 15 feet from the ground. The nest was discovered by throwing a club into the tree, when the bird flew out.



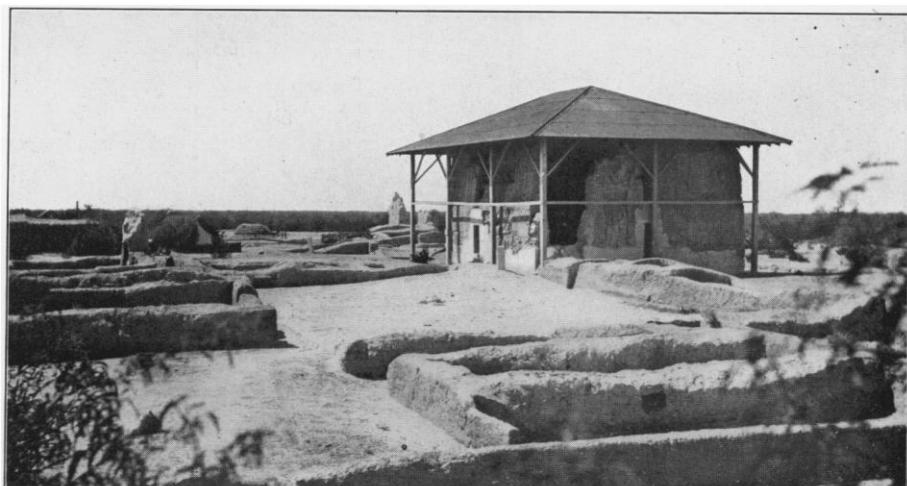
GIANT CACTUS (*CEREUS GIGANTEUS*); A WESTERN HORNED OWL
IS TO BE SEEN ABOVE THE EDGE OF THE NEST IN THE FORKS

Nothing had been visible, but the tree looked owlish, and a bombardment brought results.

For at least four years a pair of these owls have nested in the pre-historic Casa Grande ruins; see photo by Frank Pinkley, the custodian. Mr. Pinkley told me the birds raised a brood each year in the old building, and had never been molested except once, when one of them developed a decided taste for prize Wyandot chickens. This was his undoing, but his widow secured another mate very soon and went on keeping house as though nothing had happened.

Barn owls are rare in this locality, as I have seen only four of them in two years here; and one at Agua Caliente. The Indians call this bird Er-er-tvá-ho-tum, and say it is a blood-sucker or vampire. I helpt capture two of the owls in the bottom of a dry well; another was seen in an old adobe building, while the fourth was in a cottonwood tree near the river. At Agua Caliente the owl was in a clump of mesquite trees at the base of a Mal Pais hill.

The Spotted Screech Owl is rather numerous, living in natural cavities and Gilded Flicker holes in cottonwood and willow trees. The Indians would give me no name for this owl; one man said it had a name but he had forgotten it; another lookt puzzled and said he thought it had a name but he had never heard it. They all knew the bird however. The Screech Owl I believe is responsible for the disappearance of many of the smaller birds, and some of the larger ones. I have frequently found feathers in their nests, and last year saw remains of a Bluebird and an Oriole in one of their nests. Woodpeckers frequently fall victim as I have found remains of the Gilded Flicker, and Gila and Texas Woodpeckers in and near their nests and



CASA GRANDE RUINS WHICH A PAIR OF WESTERN HORNED OWLS MADE THEIR HOME FOR SEVERAL YEARS

retreats. The safety of birds nesting in holes near the home of these owls may depend on the food supply or on the temper of the destroyer. That they do not always molest birds near them is proven by the fact that nests of young birds may be found in holes very close to them. I saw a nest of young Flickers in a hole only three feet from the nest of an owl, and saw others only a few feet away. In holes in a dead cottonwood stump 25 feet high I found the following happy family: a Sparrow Hawk in the top story; a Gilded Flicker next; then a Screech Owl; and last a wood-rat.

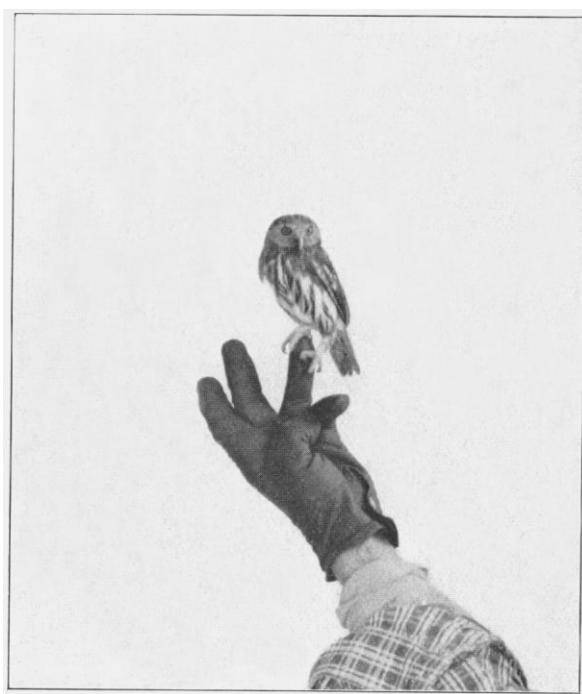
March 29 was the earliest date of nesting, and the four eggs were about half incubated. April 12 was the latest date, with four fresh eggs; and on that date were also seen nests with young recently hatcht. A hole in a low willow stump contained a dead owl on three addled eggs. One nest of young contained two partly eaten mice and some frog legs; but most holes showed signs that small birds figured largely on the bill-of-fare. Four eggs seem to make up the usual set, as the majority of nests contained that number; while sets of three were occasionally

found. Nests ranged from seven to twenty-five feet from the ground and were mostly in Gilded Flicker holes, tho sometimes a natural cavity was utilized. In most cases the sitting female seemed to be in a trance and made no resistance when taken from the nest. One bird when lifted from three downy young seemed completely dazed, and sat on my hand for a minute or more, then gravely tumbled back into the nest. A pair have nested for two years in a willow tree in a front yard here at the school. In the evening they are quite noisy and fly back and forth from the nest tree to a certain other tree nearby. The old ones seem to provide for and look after the young for some time after maturity of the latter.

Burrowing Owls, or, more properly, Ground Owls, are rare in this immediate vicinity, tho said to be more numerous on down the Gila river. I have seen only four here; one was dug out of a hole on the school farm by Indian boys; and

another flew up in the face of my team one evening nearly causing a runaway. The Pimas call this owl Kau-kau-hä'.

The little Ferruginous Pigmy Owl is fairly numerous and may be seen flying about in the daytime. They are not wild and the observer may approach as near as ten or fifteen feet before flight is taken. The bird will sit quietly with eyes staring at you, all the while impudently jerking his tail from side to side in a most undignified and un-owl-like manner. His call, given usually in the evening, is a diminutive hoot, repeated at short intervals. The only complete set found contained four eggs, and was discovered by seeing the bird leave the nest while I was a short distance from the tree and before any alarming demonstra-



AN ADULT FERRUGINOUS PIGMY OWL

tion had been made. She was very shy about returning to the nest. After returning, she hesitated some time before venturing into the hole, and when she did enter, she came out at once for a look around. At my first movement she hastily left the nest again, and when she came back her mate accompanied her. This nest was in a deserted Gila Woodpecker's hole 20 feet from the ground in a cottonwood tree. While they are sitting on a tree in plain sight they are not shy, but when in a hole they are very timid, afraid of being captured I suppose. A few times I have seen a head stick from a hole but every time the bird got out before I could approach very near.

At Agua Caliente I heard one of the owls hooting repeatedly one hot day, and investigating, found two hummingbirds busily attacking him as he sat in a mesquite tree. I began to look for his mate and soon saw a promising looking Gila

Woodpecker hole some seven feet up in a palo verde tree. Wishing to capture Mrs. Pigmy if she were at home I softly crept to the tree and stept up on a low branch in order to reach the hole. At the first noise the bird attempted to leave, but a hand clapt over the hole stopt her. A big handkerchief was thrust down the hole while I enlarged it sufficiently to insert my hand and arm. When my hand reached the bottom I thought it was in contact with a live wire, and I was absolutely sure I had "grabbed a live one."

When the hand was withdrawn the owl came along quite easily. One claw was thru the nail of my little finger, another imbedded in big finger, while her beak was thrust deep into my thumb. Blood was running from all three wounds, and the bird hung on like a bulldog. It took no little diplomacy to remove her without forming an entangling alliance with the other hand, but she was finally safe in a handkerchief. I will back one of these owls in a rough and tumble fight with any-



ADULT PAIR OF ELF OWLS

thing twice the size. The nest contained one egg, a small matter to put up such a big fight about.

A cage was provided for Lady Bite-'em, and experiments in diet began. She freely ate the bodies of small birds collected, and was properly patriotic in that she showed a savage delight in assimilating English Sparrows. I kept her about six weeks and her appetite improved all the time, any small fry being grist for her mill. She usually began eating at the head, and while she ate freely in the daytime, she disliked being watcht at her meals. I handled her frequently, at first with gloves on, in order to prepare her for a photograph. She objected to posing, but after some difficulty a picture was secured by Mr. E. W. Hudson, in charge of the U. S. Experiment Station here at Sacaton. When I releast her, she made off at once, her powers of flight not at all impaired by the weeks of captivity.

The tiny Elf Owl by reason of his strictly nocturnal habits is rarely seen. My

first one was flushed from a hole by rapping on the base of a tree. I collected him, and returning, climbed the tree to another promising-looking hole higher up. Cutting into this I secured the female. The first bird had been shot at long range, and suffered only an injured wing, so I took them home and kept them in a cage for a short time. They freely ate what few crickets and grasshoppers I could secure for them, but refused to eat small birds. Mice were not procurable, and the supply of insects running short, I had to add them to my collection of skins. During the day they remained very quiet, but at night made a choice assortment of noises, which, as I kept them in my room, were very entertaining, especially about midnight. One note very much resembled that of the Western Bluebird, and another sounded like the squeak concealed in a rubber doll. At no time did they bite or scratch, and were very easy subjects to pose for a photograph. I am indebted to Mr. Hudson for the pictures of these owls as well as for that of the Pigmy.



ELF OWL

May 10, I cut into a woodpecker's hole in a cottonwood tree and secured an owl and one egg. I took the bird home and in the night she laid another egg, and as a reward I turned her loose. Out driving one day I noticed an Elf head stuck from a hole in a giant cactus some 16 feet from the ground. I drove the wagon close to the tree, and by standing up on the back of the seat could reach the first limb. Up the cactus I scrambled and scratch my way, while Mr. Hudson applauded and took a snap-shot with his camera. By standing on top of a branch I could reach the hole, but found no eggs to compensate for time afterwards spent in removing spines from various portions of my anatomy.

The Pima Indians seem to make no distinction between the Elf and the Pigmy Owls, calling them both Koó-ah-kohld. I showed both species to them, and pointed out the difference, but it was all one to them. So I have to be content with their specific names for only four of the six owls found here.

Sacaton, Arizona.